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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001875

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: TELECOM MINISTER OPPOSES CONSTITUTIONAL
AMENDMENT NEEDED TO ELECT SLEIMAN

REF: A. BEIRUT 1860

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1855

[1](#)C. BEIRUT 1854

[1](#)D. BEIRUT 1852

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Telecom Minister Marwan Hamadeh fears electing
Lebanese Armed Force Commander Michel Sleiman president would
repeat mistakes of the past, mistakes that led to the
assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri. Hamadeh proposed
instead that March 14 build on the positive momentum
generated by President Lahoud's departure, the recent
reunification of March 14, and recent Muslim March 14 leaders
efforts to work with the Patriarch. He credited genuine fear
of the Syrians and perceived lack of support from the rest of
the international community as the factors motivating March
14 leaders to now pursue the Sleiman option. End summary.

LET'S NOT REPEAT THE SAME MISTAKES

[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met
with March 14 stalwart and Telecom Minister Marwan Hamadeh at
his home on November 26. Although he agreed that the current
situation, with PM Siniora's government holding presidential
powers, could not last more than a few weeks, Marwan bared no
bones in expressing his firm opposition to electing Lebanese
Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president. He
would oppose the required constitutional amendment out of
principle. We'd be making the same mistake we made three
years ago, he explained; former PM Rafiq Hariri, frightened
by the Syrians, agreed to amend the constitution in 2004 to
allow President Lahoud to remain in office an additional
three years, and he was killed anyway. (Note: Hamadeh was a
vocal critic of the amendment to extend Lahoud and was the
victim of an assassination attempt on October 1, 2004, the
first target in the long -- and presumably continuing -- line
of assassination attempts against what later become known as
the March 14 forces. End note.)

13. (C) Asked to explain why March 14's Muslim leaders had suddenly embraced Sleiman as the only viable solution, Hamadeh explained that Druse leader Walid Jumblatt was experiencing a "panic attack," (i.e., he genuinely feared for his life if an agreement over the president was not reached), while PM Siniora merely wanted to "make the whole thing go away."

14. (C) Hamadeh predicted that all the pro-Syrian MPs would grab the chance to elect Sleiman. The only person who would oppose it would be Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun. Even Hizballah would support Sleiman, because it would determine at that point that the support of the army was worth more than half the Maronites, leading them to abandon Aoun. So, we'd be moving back to the Quadripartite alliance, he said, referring to the 2005 coalition between Amal, Hizballah, Hariri's Future Movement, and Jumblatt's Druse.

15. (C) UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir Pedersen arrived toward the end of the Ambassador's meeting. Pedersen (who clearly was not aware of how advanced and how fast the discussions on Sleiman have gone) noted that Hizballah, perhaps bluffing, had told him a Sleiman presidency would be difficult for Aoun and therefore difficult for Hizballah. Pedersen said that, if that was Hizballah's approach, it seemed they wanted Aoun or no one, making people believe they wanted a vacuum in the presidency. Hizballah replied that a vacuum would be fine, and that the only thing that would trigger violence was a half plus one vote. Pedersen opined that Hizballah, failing to get Aoun elected and having failed to prevent Lebanon's attendance at the Annapolis conference, was hoping to use a vacuum as a tactical move to give them time to rebuild support.

BUILD INSTEAD ON POSITIVE MOMENTUM

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14. (C) Instead, Hamadeh said, we should build on the positive momentum of the past few days. March 14 was reunited in force during its recent meeting at the Phoenicia Hotel, where 40-some of its MPs, fearful for their own lives, have been locked up since the September 19 assassination of March 14 MP Antoine Ghanem. All 68 majority MPs went to parliament for the November 23 session to elect a president. President Lahoud left office, alone, and without succumbing to Aoun's request that he appoint Aoun as prime minister. March 14 Muslim leaders Saad Hariri and PM Siniora both went to visit the Patriarch in a demonstration of Christian-Muslim solidarity, and the Patriarch's speech (which he labeled "not bad") stressed that the Siniora government was only for an "interim period." Is the Patriarch ready for Sleiman, he asked?

FRENCH, SYRIAN, IRANIAN VIEWS IMPACT
MARCH 14 THINKING

15. (C) Hamadeh, noting that the French press now was talking about a Sleiman presidency, wondered along whether this idea was the result of the "last seeds planted by the French before they left Lebanon." The French thinking, he explained, would be that any president is better than none, and that Sleiman is not the worst of the "any"; and this solution would prevent civil strife in the country (Jumblatt's biggest fear), safeguard Hariri's interests, and provide a way out for Siniora.

16. (C) Everyone, not just Jumblatt, fears a Syria-U.S. deal that will leave them out in the cold, Hamadeh continued. The Syrians have already received assurances from the U.S., in terms of an invitation to Annapolis and getting the Golan back on the agenda, and the international community rushed to Damascus to talk to them about who should be Lebanon's next president. This could explain why Lahoud departed quietly,

he suggested, noting that he did so despite the fact that no compromise candidate had been reached. Furthermore, there is a strong perception that Israel prefers to keep the Asad regime protected, so March 14 is trying to limit its losses with Syria. And we can't ignore the Iranian dimension, he added; Iran merely wants to keep things suspended until it achieves a nuclear weapon.

FEAR OF U.S. ABANDONMENT BEHIND SLEIMAN OPTION

¶7. (C) Acknowledging that Sleiman's candidacy could divide March 14, Hamadeh said that if they stuck to the names on the Patriarch's list, March 14 would stay united. But to proceed with a half plus one vote, they would need the "clearest" international support from the U.S. and its allies. Some in March 14 are pressuring the U.S. to accept the Sleiman idea, he agreed, but it's because they are genuinely scared and feel deprived of international political support. Hizballah may not know where Syria is going, he said, but we don't know where the U.S. is going.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Hamadeh is naturally going to be wary of going for a constitutional amendment to elect Sleiman when he nearly lost his life after standing on principle against the constitutional amendment extending Emile Lahoud's presidential term in 2004. In fact, if Hamadeh would oppose the constitutional amendment, this week -- as long as Tariq Mitri is in Annapolis -- he alone could block this approach: under the rules governing constitutional amendments, all 16 ministers currently in Beirut would have to approve the decree proposing the amendment. Yet while Hamadeh is perhaps among the most courageous of the March 14 key players, his principled opposition to Sleiman's candidacy will weaken under pressure from his feudal-style political boss, Walid Jumblatt. Jumblatt, too, has been extremely brave in refusing to back away from his strong criticisms of Syria and Hizballah. But he has softened on the presidency, out of fear of Syria-provoked chaos and violence he is not prepared to confront. And if Jumblatt has softened, it is inevitable that Hamadeh will follow.

FELTMAN